

GEORGIAN THEATRE ROYAL NOTES FOR TOUR GUIDES

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WITH observations by Mr Carter, an experienced tour guide**

The purpose of these notes is to assist new guides of the theatre

The Georgian Theatre Royal (1788) is the oldest working theatre in its original form in the country. The theatre occupies a stone walled building 28 feet wide by an average of 61 feet long (from the back of the stage to the front entrance). It is a Grade I listed building of national and international architectural and cultural significance.

These notes offer tour guides a brief physical description of the building, but it is equally important to give meaning to the Georgian Theatre Royal by reference to the drama (its repertoire, taste and spectators), the theatre as industry (law, organisation of the Samuel Butler repertory company and his circuit), actors and acting, and stage presentation. The Theatre Museum offers tourists many additional contexts, and during the next year our website will expand to include more documentation and educational material for tourists, students and guides alike. In turn, it is important to emphasise the theatre's current and future season programme. We encourage all guides to personalise their tour according to their interests in the theatre arts, and their wider interest in Richmond's history.

There were 300 pre-1837 built small provincial theatres like the Georgian Theatre Royal. The six remaining theatres have been much altered, and elsewhere only some fragments remain. To place the importance of this building in a longer chronological context, these are the remaining theatres to 1867:

1766, Theatre Royal, Bristol, **1788 Georgian Theatre Royal, Richmond**, 1812 Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London, 1814 Festival Theatre Cambridge, 1819 Theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds, 1821 Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, 1830 Chatsworth House, Private Theatre, 1837 Theatre Royal, Newcastle on Tyne, 1858 Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, 1867 Tyne Theatre & Opera House, Newcastle on Tyne.

Whilst the building is today recognised as the most complete example of a Georgian playhouse, its story a chequered career. The building existed as a theatre until the lease (issued by the Richmond Corporation) expired in 1830. From then, the theatre was used only occasionally for theatrical performances, and was divided into an auction room and wine warehouse in 1848. Theatrical use dominated its first 42 years. Thereafter, and for the next 133 years it was put to several other non-theatrical uses. It is therefore perhaps surprising to learn that the Richmond playhouse survived virtually architecturally intact until it was rediscovered in the late 1930s.

Tours will begin at the box office

The site forms a collection of related buildings: the theatre, the museum, the new foyers and the adjacent studio in Friars Wynd. The theatre is by far the most significant in every respect. The other buildings simply enable the theatre to provide important ancillary facilities. Through the 2003 restoration, the theatre is now largely as conceived when constructed: a space specifically designed for live performances. All the known significant interventions which have taken place during its periods of alternative use have been reversible. In the eighteen months leading to the 2003 reopening, opportunity was taken to remove many of the later alterations and accretions since the building was last restored and reopened in 1963.

You have entered through a new door to this small foyer that is fitted between the curved wall rear wall of the front boxes and the oblique outer north wall of the theatre front. This includes a new box office. In former times, entry was through the door in the north-west corner on Friars Wynd. This gives access to a landing with the original single pay box which all members of the audience had once to pass.

From here steps lead up to the foyer with access doors in the curved wall to the boxes, and a flight of stairs doubles back over the pay box to the galleries above.

Up the stairs to the Centre Gallery – main view of the theatre

The main features of what you see: the theatre is divided almost equally internally between stage and auditorium, the latter overlapping the former by a forestage. Almost everything you see is authentically Georgian. The proscenium is tiny but well proportioned. The sense of scale within so small a theatre (the holding capacity today is 214 seats, although it held 400 in the eighteenth century) allows at once for big acting as well as a remarkably intimate actor-audience relationship.

The auditorium is on three levels. A rectangular PIT is enclosed by BOXES, with rows of BENCHES at the sides and facing the stage. The front boxes are backed by a curved wall. Note that the boxes are divided by low partitions of the same height as the box fronts, each related to one of the small timber Doric columns the side GALLERIES and the main gallery facing the stage, situated above the front boxes.

A proscenium door on either side of the stage provides access to the front of the stage; these are separated from the side boxes by timber partitions. . Above the proscenium doors are JULIET BOXES, again separated from the side galleries by boarded partitions.

A flat ceiling over the pit and side boxes ends at the upstage post flanking the proscenium doors, at which point the pelmet is fixed. The ceiling slopes gently above the tiered gallery to provide (minimum) headroom. The contemporary control box at rear contains light and sound desks.

You will see the FRONT CLOTH in position. Front cloths, which depicted a local scene, were a familiar integral part of the decorations of many theatres in Britain for the whole of the nineteenth century. These front cloths greeted the audience on arrival and helped raise their expectations. It is a roller cloth attached to a 6 inch wooden drum on which the cloth rolled upwards to reveal the scene and the actors. There is no primary evidence as to what was painted on the Richmond front cloth but there is evidence that a local Royal Academician, George Cuit the elder (1743-1818) painted scenery for the opening of the theatre in 1788. It was decided to reproduce on the front cloth a view of Richmond Castle and the River Swale, painted by Cuit in 1810. The REEFER CURTAIN would be used only at the end of or at the interval, if any, between mainpiece and afterpiece of the long evening's programme. Tour guides might lower it when tourists are standing on the forestage.

Down to the centre boxes

The eleven boxes are named after dramatists whose plays were frequently staged by Samuel Butler's company. They are, from the stage in a clockwise direction:

Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), John Dryden (1631-1700), Nicholas Rowe (1674-1718), Sir John Vanbrugh (1664-1726, also the architect of Castle Howard), Ben Jonson (c.1572-1637), William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Thomas Otway (1652-1685), William Congreve (1670-1729), George Farquhar (1678-1707), Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774), and George Colman the elder (1732-1794).

In common with many playhouses of the period the ceiling has been painted with a sky of white clouds on a blue background. On the stage left box the shield of the Borough of Richmond remain as in Butler's time. On the facing box the shield of Thomas Dundas (one of the theatre's original patrons) has been reinstated. (The original was lost during a small fire at the theatre in the 1940s). Over the centre box is reproduced the Royal Arms of George III. These arms are known to have been introduced when the 'Theatre' became the 'Theatre Royal'.

Down to the pit

Steps lead down from the entrance landing to a passage beneath the side boxes on the western side only of the theatre. The timber structure of the boxes and gallery above are supported on solid walls of stone. This had been the case until the theatre fell into disuse and a wine cellar was built beneath the auditorium and stage. This was removed before the 1963 restoration, and the pit walls and floor replaced. The pit walls were reinstated to marks on the underside of the supporting beams beneath the side boxes.

Through to the machine room

The understage is divided into four spaces. The largest is the MACHINE ROOM. It occupies the full width of the theatre beneath the front half of the stage, and is where the traps and mobile footlights are operated. At the front is the ORCHESTRA PIT, which can now be covered over to extend the forestage to the end of the first side boxes.

Through to the dressing rooms

The remainder of the under-stage area is divided by a central wall into two DRESSING ROOMS, opening off the machine room, and each connecting to the stage by the stairs. The Pit, Pit Passage, Machine Room and Dressing Rooms are all excavated below ground level as a basement.

Up to the stage

At the front of the stage there is a cut for the footlights, and behind this there are three other openings in the sloping stage: two corner traps and one rectangular grave trap. The stage effects used by Butler's company can now be recreated, which we hope to do in the annual pantomime. In the rear wall of the stage there is a fireplace. Stage Right is a piano store (an addition). The 'get in' for scenery is Stage Left.

None of the original stage surface survived the conversion into a wine store and auction room after the theatre closed in 1848. A new stage has been built in the style of the original. An eighteenth century groove system has been reintroduced which can handle wing scenery in the Georgian fashion.

When tourists are on stage, guides should discuss (and demonstrate via the MUSEUM MODE switch) the lighting of the auditorium. This was by candle. (Gas was certainly not available in Richmond until well after the theatre's closure, although it is less certain whether oil lights were ever used here). Whether or not oil fittings were installed later in the theatre's history it is reasonable to suppose that glass chimneys were introduced here as elsewhere early in the nineteenth century to steady the flame of the new wax candles which were more efficient than the older tallow candles.

There are 54 candles, each set in glass chimneys on cast iron fittings. From the ceiling three 'rings' are suspended, each adjustable in height: one central and two over the forestage. From above each column smaller rings are hung from brackets. All will have random flicker and when they are set at the appropriate levels provide as realistic an impression of eighteenth century lighting as modern technology allows.

Because the theatre is a working community playhouse and professional touring house, the stage lighting has been a big challenge. Before the renovations, lighting resulted in an unsatisfactory intrusion of heavy looking black stage luminaries. This year, we have reduced the intrusions: instead of conventional mains voltage luminaires a number of much smaller low voltage

stage lights, which were originally invented to fit in tight positions for location filming have been used.

Whilst on stage, please explain the addition of a third, 'accessible' dressing room, part of the newly constructed extensions (down stage right).

Through to The Theatre Museum

The museum documents the theatre's story from inception to present day. The first theatre museum in the country, it was opened in 1979 by Richard Baker, and expanded in the 1990s. The collection includes: documentation covering each phase of the theatre's life, such as the original letters of application for licences from Samuel Butler; a collection of original playbills and handbills; a copy of the theatre circuit; engravings of artists associated with the theatre; Edward Kean's snuff box, an interactive 'thunder box'; a scaled-down replica of the theatre stage, complete with proscenium door and Juliet boxes; the oldest complete set of painted scenery in Britain; fundraising records; photographs and an extensive archive.

Some Tour Observations by Mr Carter are of interest to new guides

This account of a guided tour of the theatre is based on the conditions that existed before the refurbishment began. Some features will obviously be different after the re-opening but most of the factual or speculative statements made in it will still be relevant.

I start my tour by gathering the visitors in the collection area and taking a few minutes to find out a little about them and to explain briefly the origins of the theatre. I ask if anyone is involved in theatre or has any knowledge of theatrical history. If, as occasionally happens, someone has an interest in the subject it is possible that they know as much if not more than I do. I make it clear that I am not an expert in the subject and that I will only give them information as fact if I am aware of evidence to prove it, e.g. dates of opening and closure or the existence of original timbers under the stage where the traps were. I explain how dramatic performances were banned by the puritans in 16—something and mention the existence of a plaque at the top of Castle Walk commemorating the flogging of four men in 1652 for giving such a performance. I explain how dramatic performances were permitted under licence, mainly in major cities, after the restoration of the monarchy (hence the Restoration Comedies), but how touring groups of actors were able to give performances in the guise of rehearsals or, as in the playbill that is in our archives, as “gratis” items between the musical items of a “Concert”. I tell how the act was finally repealed in 1788 and how the manager of a highly respected group of actors applied to Richmond Corporation in November 1787 for the lease of land “adjoining the Quaker Meeting” to build a theatre, was granted the lease to begin in May 1788 and built the theatre ready to open in September of the same year. Giving this talk before entering the main theatre

building give a few minutes grace for any late comers to join the group on the tour.

On entering the theatre from the museum I allowed visitors a few seconds to absorb the atmosphere from the actors' viewpoint before asking them to follow me to the gallery, allowing a little time on the new staircase for them to see the photographs and playbills on the way up.

In the gallery I explain the kicking boards and point out how vulnerable the audience members in the pit were to falling or thrown objects, how near the stage is and how missiles could easily be thrown at the actors. I illustrate the acoustic properties of the theatre by relating a personal story of how I spoiled a performers joke by saying the one word punch line in a normal voice whilst sitting in the gallery. Finally, before leaving the gallery by the original staircase, having explained that fact to them, I relate the story of the magistrates asking the Corporation to close that part of the theatre to audiences because of complaints of "riotous and immoral" behaviour and leaving them to decide what manner of immorality might have been involved. At the door to the "Shakesper" box I point out the peephole, which would be used to ascertain the appropriate time for latecomers to take their seats. When seated I point out that that box has previously been occupied by our royal visitors, including the late Queen Mother. I then draw attention to the playwrights' names above the boxes and explain that later they will see the original Shakespere painting above the box that they are in. I describe how playbills invited patrons to book their seats earlier in the day and for servants to be sent to reserve their places. I also mention that some playbills mention that servants must be paid for and I speculate that that was because the master would require food and drink to be served to him and his party during the long evening and that the servant would probably occupy the narrow seat at the back of the box. Leaving the boxes I stop to point out the original pay desk, built in under the previously described original staircase, before leading the party down the pit passage.

When in the pit I can sit facing all the party and at that point I describe the period following closure in 1848 and the rediscovery and restoration of 1960/63. The amount of detail that I include depends on the length of time left and the interest level of the visitors. I also mention here, if it has not come about as the answer to an earlier question, that we can currently seat 214 but that 28 of those seats are severely restricted view. I also explain that no records exist of audience numbers in the 18th and 19th centuries but that it is believed that as many as 400 could have attended some special performances.

Taking the party into the machine room I point out the footlights (floats) and the original slides for the trapdoors. In the dressing room I point out the original brickwork of the fireplace and briefly explain that water would have to be brought from the Market Place for washing, drinking and possibly cooking purposes. Finally, at the head of the staircase, I would draw attention to the fireplace and explain that in a playbill for the first night of a season at Whitby is a note that "the theatre will be adequately aired as fires have been lit for the past three weeks."

In 1996 or thereabouts guides were instructed to commence tours in the gallery and asked to take 30-35 minutes per tour. In spite of this one guide continued to take up to 75 minutes per tour and one guide insisted that as she had always started the tours in the "Royal" box she would continue to do so. It is difficult to guarantee the length of time that a tour will take as it can be affected by factors as numbers in the party, age and mobility of the members and the level of interest shown by the visitors i.e. questions asked. I agree that 35 minutes is an optimum time but provision must be made for overruns of 10 to 15 minutes. If, as in the last couple of seasons, we have only one guide per session then hourly tours will have to be the norm. With more guides then tour frequency can be increased in proportion. If we could achieve the same availability of guides that we had nine years ago i.e. three per session then there would be no need for set times for the start of tours, as long as a gap of about 15-20 minutes is allowed between.